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ABSTRACT

Recent research in psycholinguistics shows that experience with language in its communicative function is essential for learning to speak a second language. A suitable linguistic environment provides for the development of strategies for aural comprehension and for the acquisition of means of expression. A different approach to curriculum is involved, in which the learning of concepts and facts occurs while the acquisition and development of the second language is taking place, and provision is made for members of the group to share information with each other. This permits language to become a vehicle of communication rather than a study in itself. Research is presented that shows that the results of a group of 12-year-olds in an activity-centered program on a battery of tests for auditory comprehension, reading comprehension, and oral production were not significantly different from those of a similar group in a teacher-centered program, although the activity-centered group had spent only 60 percent as much time in class. Cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors help to explain the success of the activity-centered learning. It appears that the activity-centered approach satisfies the implied requirements of Piaget's theory of the acquisition of knowledge. (Author/AMH)

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ACTIVITY-CENTRED APPROACHES TO SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING*

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The research I am going to talk about today compared two approaches to second language learning: the Teacher-centred (TC) and the Activity-centred (AC). Both of these took place within immersion programmes for learning French as a second language. My hypothesis, based largely on Piagetian theories of cognitive development and the rôle of discourse theory on the acquisition of language, was that an AC programme would be a more efficient method of developing communicative and linguistic competence wtihin a school context than would a TC programme. The results confirmed the hypothesis: French language skills of students who were involved in an Activity-centred programme were comparable to those of students in a Teacher-centred programme, although the class time of the TC group was almost double that of the AC group.

The sample consisted of some 240 students at the Secondary I level in Montreal area schools (approximately 12 years of age). There were 4 groups involved: Francophone and Anglophone control groups, TC and AC immersion groups. This report will concentrate on two groups: the TC immersion students who came from two schools and the AC immersion students from four schools. The schools were matched as far as possible to control for socio-economic factors and tended to be middle to upper-middle class. The sample was about equally divided between males

FL013 249

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and females. An equal number of students was selected from a below-average IQ range, an average range and an above-average range. Students in both immersion programmes chose to attend French immersion classes rather than regular English language classes. Since the AC programme was offered by one school board and the TC programme by another, each group of students chose the only French immersion option available to it. Their motivation, therefore can be considered comparable.

The test battery included English and French language tests. Three-way analyses of variance were performed on the results, using programme, IQ and sex of student as independent variables.

TEACHER--CENTRED IMMERSION PROGRAMME

Students in the TC group had received French as a second language instruction from K to grade 6, for 20 to 30 mintes a day, 5 days a week. The immersion programme at the grade 7 (Secondary I) level is open to all students. Their programme consists of 85% course instruction in French, in French language arts, math, physical sciences and social sciences. One period a day (45 minutes long) is spent studying English language arts. Class time spent in French is therefore 21¼ hours per week.

Teachers in the immersion programme are native speakers of French and tend to be Canadian. Teachers do not directly correct students' mistakes in French during regular classes, but do so during

the French language arts period. Hearing correct language from the teacher serves as a model for the students's acquisition of French.

The curriculum is pre-determined, i.e., subjects are chosen, texts are provided, goals are set and tested for level of attainment. All students are expected to cover basically the same material.

The goals of the programme are primarily oral comprehension and fluency. Emphasis, therefore, is on oral work with writing introduced after several months, by Christmas. Accuracy in writing is not stressed.

ACTIVITY-CENTRED IMMERSION PROGRAMME

Students in the AC group also had received instruction in French as a second language from K to grade 6 for 20 - 30 minutes per day, 5 days a week. There were no entry criteria for this programme either. In this programme, 50 - 55% of the student's day is spent in French. Scheduling of time varied among the four schools participating in the reserach. In some schools, entire mornings were devoted to the French programme (less 1½ hours per week for physical education); while in others, English language arts, math or options might split up the day. Total time spent per week in French was 13½ hours. French language arts, physical and social sciences were offered in all schools. However, these subjects were presented using a thematic approach and AC learning as methodology.

It is important to note the following aspects of AC methodology:

1. There is no attempt to structure linguistic content.
2. Students choose their own area of study within the theme

suggested by the teacher.

3. Students do whatever is necessary to find the information required, i.e., go out and look for it, ask someone for information, or check reference books.

4. Students present their findings in a form which they have selected, i.e., by means of a model, a picture, a written handout, or whatever means they consider appropriate.

5. Students use each other as well as the teacher as resource persons.

6. This type of activity is not possible when the curriculum is pre-set and norm-oriented.

Teachers in the AC programme were bilingual, with native-like French speech. All were well-trained both as teachers and as specialists in teaching French as a second language (FSL). They made language corrections indirectly, as did the teachers in the TC group, except during the period devoted to French language arts. While the goals of the programme are primarily aural comprehension and oral fluency, reading and writing are used as necessary by the students. Accuracy in reading and writing is encouraged.

TEST BATTERY

A full battery of reading and writing comprehension and production tests in English was undertaken by both groups. However, the results of these tests will not be discussed since they replicate the findings of all other researchers in this area, i.e., the immersion

classes showed no loss in their English language skills.

The battery of French language tests is listed on page 3 of the hand-out. These included 2 tests de rendement, published for use in Francophone schools. These are standardized tests in language and in math, for which norms are published each school year and, therefore, comparisons can be made against native speakers. The test de comprehension orale was based on a passage from a book and was recorded on tape. The story was read and questions were answered by students on a multiple-choice answer sheet. The test de lecture was a French adaptation of the California Reading Test. It was divided into two sections: 90 multiple-choice items on vocabulary and 29 multiple-choice items on comprehension. The test de production orale was given to a sub-sample of 60% of the students. The basis of evaluation was an individual conversation between each student and a trained tester. This was recorded. A cartoon sequence was shown to each student and the student was asked to tell the story depicted by the cartoon. The student was then asked a number of relevant questions about his interests and plans for the future, or experiences of the past. Evaluation of the speech sample was done by two trained raters, both native French speakers, each working independently. The tapes were cut into segments by interview, and conversations from all 4 groups were then spliced randomly to ensure anonymity. Criteria of evaluation were listening comprehension, pronunciation, grammar correctness, vocabulary, and fluency of communication.

RESULTS

In the French language tests, a comparison of the two immersion programme groups reveals significant differences only in 2 of the written measures: the Reading Test and the test de rendement en français in favour of the TC immersion group. Both these tests are instruments which evaluate academic type skills, and are affected by both the strudents' IQ level and formal teaching methods. There was no statistically significant difference between the two groups on the other tests, i.e., aural comprehension, math, and oral production. This finding is of particular interest because of the shorter length of time spent by the AC programme group in French studies and, also, because two of the schools in the AC programme had never studied math in French. It is useful to remember that the TC group spent 21¼ hours per week in French language classes while the AC group spent 13½ hours per week.

The results of the AC group in math merit examination. Two of the four schools tested had not studied math in French and yet achieved the highest scores within the group. These results suggest that a new language can be applied to areas previously unexplored in that language and support Piaget's theory that language follows development of logical structures. In this intance, these students demonstrated the use of linguistic skills in a second language to solve cognitive problems.

Let's look further at the theory underlying AC methodology which might explain these results. To my mind, this theory has three aspects:

cognitive, linguistic and affective.

Cognitive Aspects

First, Piaget says a child must operate on his environment because he builds his own set of meanings from his experiences. There are many opportunities for a variety of experiences in AC classes and these generate language. As applied to language, this means constructing language structures in specific situations for real needs. The child builds his own network of assocations. Because they are created, they are better retained.

Second, children are at different levels of the concrete operations stage - each can explore topics at his own level of understanding and in his own style (e.g., those identified by Brown (1979) as impulsive or reflective; tolerant or intolerant of ambiguity; with a tendency to skeletonize or to embroider; and field dependent or independent).

Third, during concrete operations Piaget (1972) says that operations remain relatively independent of language. (A child acquires conservation of substance, of weight and of volume and uses the same linguistic arguments for each notion.)

This idea can also be applied to language acquisition; similar arguments and linguistic structures are used to broaden knowledge; the child is increasing his understanding of the world through consolidation of important notions. As he continues to explore ideas, he uses language which is already known and acquires whatever language is specific to the new task so as to express his thought.

This is an intrinsic learning technique, a symbiotic strategy, i.e., cognition and language are interdependent.

Last, according to Piaget, an individual's mental representation is highly personal. Through experience, verbal expression is developed, but reflection is also important (as he has shown in its rôle in attaining conservation in operations). There needs to be time to think about what one is doing.

Linguistic Aspects

L1 research has shown that language acquisition is favoured by interaction, by the opportunities to create language and to use it frequently. I believe this applies to L2 learning as well. There are 4 points to be considered:

1. opportunities are necessary to create language to express thoughts, needs, wishes.

2. repetition (a necessary part of language acquisition) occurs naturally (not as an echo chorus).

3. the learner interacts with peers, teacher and others in a natural way.

4. the language used is a tool for cognitive growth, which in turn requires the learning of more language.

Affective Aspects

First, there is motivation to communicate: students are not responding to questions to which everyone knows the answer.

Second, the atmosphere is non-threatening:

- each child works at his own level of ability;
- the programme organization provides support for physical movement.
- the programme provides support for ego development, i.e., for making decisions and organizing material.

Third, there is considerable interaction with peers where children can develop socialization skills and learn to work with others and where each student gets feedback on his product or performance which is directed at information, not at him personally.

Finally, the student takes responsibility for his own learning. He makes choices and commits himself, rather than following the same programme as everyone else.

Let me show you some specific examples of how such an Activity-Centred programme can work, and then we can discuss further the results of the research and their implications.

(Comment used to accompany slide presentation)

There are many events in school life which can be used as a basis for second language learning. One of these is the science fair which occurs regularly in most schools. Each person or group of children chooses a topic. Information is gathered and a presentation is prepared by the children, who then share it with others.

Another school event - at least in Canada - is the winter carnival. Here you can see both group activities and individual activities at work. In the whole class activity, there is a process of decision-making which requires language. Furthermore, there is cooperation in working together in making the object - where normal conversation takes place. Then, there is the aspect of socialization, which I think is always important, and provides motivation for different conversation. The individual or small group activities require designing, planning, working out the processes in construction, and all of these make use of language which is appropriate for the situation.

Developing skills is another aspect which can serve as a vehicle for language learning. An example of this is a sewing project where the whole group sews various animals. This is an example of an activity which is selected by the teacher, who prepares the language elements, but allows for individual choice by the learners, of the materials and the particular animal they are going to make.

Cooking is another excellent vehicle for learning language and for developing skills. There are several possibilities within the general area of cooking. For instance, children can make cookies or cupcakes for sale: here not only is that actual cooking process involved, but invitations and posters must also be made to announce the sale to the rest of the school. It is also possible to prepare and entire meal - if you are particularly ambitious, that is.

This is a very interesting activity which not only develops skills and promotes language - but permits the teaching of the other

culture. In this particular case, eating the French way was the objective, and the children, after learning the components of a French meal, planned each of the different courses as a group during class-time. They then did the shopping required after collecting the necessary money. They, with some help from the teacher, divided into groups and did the actual cooking and preparing of the meal. They did all of the serving, eating, and cleaning up afterwards. All these activities are enjoyable to children, even though we as grown-ups may find them somewhat tiresome.

Another example of Activity-Centred learning is the development of an academic theme. One such theme concerned birds. Again, this theme was selected by the teacher, but was explored by the individual members of the class. That is, a discussion in the second language took place in which either the students knowledge was demonstrated, or their intention to explore the subject further was noted, in this case on the blackboard. Some of the individual and group activities which resulted were: the making of bird-feeders, the identification of birds in the neighbourhood and what they ate. Some of the children decided to incubate eggs, and this led rather to a disaster, since they didn't take proper care of the incubator and let the humidity get too low. However, I think it should be remembered that the failure which was experienced in this case is not particularly important. Language is necessary to investigate failure as well as success, and the children learned a number of things about the necessary components of an incubation period, as well as the language to express these notions.

So often an Activity-Centred programme is considered to be the taking of excursions, of going outside the class. I hope that I've shown you that this isn't necessarily so. However, excursions are useful and interesting and can lead to many follow-up activities in the classroom.

I'd like to point out that even ordinary places can become interesting when you throw out a challenge. In this particular case, the children were asked to spend a day in Montreal in December without boots or a coat. Now, this is possible in Montreal because there is an extensive underground city. Before this trip was taken, the children put in a considerable amount of preparatory work, and I'd like to use this example to empnasize some basic principles about going out on a language learning excursion.

The first thing is that the students should each find out some of the necessary information for the trip. And they should then share it with the others, so that each person or small group is working on a small part of the overall activity. Since all the children want to know all about what is going to happen, they are eager to provide information and to listen to it from their peers.

Another important aspect that I have found is that small groups are much more likely to speak the second language than the group taken as a whole, and for that reason I like to have a parent or a teacher with five or six students. I like the students to choose where they're going to go within a particular excursion, and each group then does its own thing. When they come back, they share their information

with the other students, who have not necessarily done the same things. All of this promotes language based on a real communication of events, of memories. Afterwards, it should be integrated with classroom activities.

Going to an outdoor market is an excellent activity for younger children as well as for older children. Having something to buy at the market and a bit of money is a motivation for the child to learn the names of fruits and vegetables, to learn the conversational gambits necessary to purchase something, to get change, to ask how much things cost; and the real life situation really makes this a very worthwhile learning experience.

Each region has its own particular celebrations or festivals. A very popular one in the Montreal area is a sugaring-off expedition. This is a visit to a maple syrup farm where the children can learn about the making of maple syrup, and toffee, and sugar. They can eat some of the particular foods associated with spring time and maple syrup. They can also meet other speakers, perhaps native speakers of these students' second language. I find that students need a very particular motivation to enter into conversation with native speakers. I have tried simple interview questionnaires, and this has worked quite well. The students can always blame the teacher for giving them this silly assignment - but nevertheless, it does get them talking to strangers, and practising both comprehension and production skills.

This is also an excellent time for the teacher to discover

some of the interests of her students. It's an opportunity for talk about other than academic things. It's an opportunity for a student to talk about something which is of particular interest to him that no one suspected. For example, I learned that one of my students was quite an expert on mosses on one of these occasions, something I should never have discovered in the classroom atmosphere.

Frequently in the newspapers or on television, one hears about particular events in the locality which might be of interest to the students. One of these was a kite-making project for which the young people had received government aid to pass on this skill to anyone interested. I found kite-making a delightful activity for students: these is new vocabulary to be learned, there is an interesting product to be made, and there are language skills and motor skills in the process of making the kite. There are opportunities for socialization among the students, for cooperation during the process of kite-making, and then the fun of flying the kite afterwards.

The content areas of other subjects in the school should not be ignored in teaching a second language. For example, do some science by taking youngsters out of doors to explore a pond. Doing so in the second language is exciting, interesting, and very worthwhile.

Many children have cameras nowadays. Small groups can do a social studies project, investigating the neighbourhood from the point of view of the economic, social, cultural, and political life of their community. They can take pictures, find out information, and then re-

port back to the rest of the group who have not studied that particular aspect of the project.

The activities I have shown you are but a small number of the possibilities that are available within any school, within any community and with practically any age group of children. They are examples from one community. Similar opportunities exist within every community.

(End of comment used to accompany slide presentation)

Emphasis is placed in an AC programme on the student's involvement with his own learning, through choice of projects and interaction with his peers and the teacher in an informal atmosphere.

But AC methodology need not be confined to immersion programming. It can be used as well in core instruction (i.e., 30 minutes per day instruction in ESL or FSL), either within the regular periods of instruction or in additional periods of complementary activities.

Let us return to the results. Some very interesting interactions occurred in a number of the statistical analyses. These were caused by higher than normal scores by males in the AC group (Test de production orale: communication and vocabulary; Test de lecture, Comprehension sub-test). It is interesting to conjecture that the relaxed atmosphere of the AC class, the greater allowance for physical movement, the encouragement of self-initiating learning, are all more suitable

to the twelve-year-old boy than the regular routine of the teacher-directed class.

As shown in Table I (page 3 of the hand-out), IQ proved to be important on the academic types of tests, i.e., those which required recall, understanding of abstract concepts, or written language skills. In these tests, the high IQ grouping scored highest and the low IQ grouping scored lowest.

However, in the aural-oral tests of both groups, students of average IQ, and in some cases of below-average IQ, achieved higher scores than the high IQ grouping. This replicates findings by Genesee (1976, 1978). The reason for this may be that the immersion class does not place undue emphasis on strictly academic performance, particularly of a written nature. The child who, therefore, has not been as quick at problem-solving or organization of material in the English stream is now on the same footing (i.e., working in a second language) as his more intelligent (according to IQ scales) confrère. Perhaps because he is not stigmatized as a result of previous performance, he is more able to use all his oral facilities to advantage.

On the other hand, it is possible the IQ is not an important factor in acquiring those language skills related to interpersonal communication. Gardner and Lambert (1972) have already suggested that IQ is only one variable in determining second language success and that attitudes and motivation are significantly related to mastery of the second language.

I feel that an AC approach to language learning satisfies the implied requirements of Piaget's theory of how knowledge is acquired. From the point of view of motivation, the AC class provides choice to the student within a given learning situation. The student commits himself to learning by his choice, he acts on his environment to obtain knowledge, and has the opportunity to use a lot of language, because of the considerable interpersonal interaction which naturally occurs. This benefits the student who is learning a new language by providing many opportunities to communicate in the second language. As Chomsky says, all children learn to speak their native language. Even children with physical disabilities which prevent hearing or speaking can do so, given special training. One might speculate, therefore, that under favourable conditions, all children can learn a second language.

The conclusions reached by this study are obvious. Students from two very different types of second language immersion programmes were tested for language skills. There was no significant difference found between the linguistic competence exhibited by students in the Teacher-Centred programme and that displayed by those in the Activity-Centred one. And yet students in the Teacher-Centred programme spent almost twice as much time in a second language environment as did those in the Activity-Centred one.

It is clear that as far as second language learning goes, the Activity-Centred environment, partly because it more nearly replicates the situation in which a first language is learned, is markedly more

effective than the Teacher-Centred one. This is because it motivates the children to learn: the activities they engage in are intrinsically relevant to them, rather than being interests created for them by an outside force. The conditions encourage language hearing and language production in authentic situations - in other words, the children hear real things and have real things to say. This provides both motivation and true practice in using language. Finally, the learning of language is tied to each child's level of cognitive development, and the two progress in tandem.

In conclusion, I would like to say how delighted I am to hear other presenters supporting language learning through activities. Although we all mean slightly different things by "learning through activities," the basic principles are the same: Elaine Tarone (1982) mentioned the importance of communicative pressure or need in L2 learning, and this factor is included in an AC programme. Leslie Beebe (1982) suggested that practice in a variety of sociolinguistic contexts was necessary, and this condition is met in an AC classroom. Merrill Swain (1982) considered that teacher talk needed to be cut back, and a context for student learning established, in contrast to teacher lecturing. She also suggested that it should be possible to generate activities which would provide opportunities to learn grammatical content, e.g., the conditional. I think that implementation of all of these factors is possible withint the AC classroom. This methodology, if I may call it that, is based in the final analysis on a philosophy which respects

the child's ability and willingness to learn, and provides an environment in which the process of L2 acquisition can take place.

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